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AUTHOR Monaster, Rebecca
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ABSTRACT

New curriculum emphases and new devices to make language teaching more productive are needed to meet the needs of students who are involved in a new age. The following assumptions should be implicit in developing an oral language program plan: oral language is vital to thinking, reading, and writing; mass media have created a new and different society; the nature of the student being taught is different; the role of the teacher is in need of modification; and new tools and techniques are needed to improve oral language teaching and to increase learning. An oral language program designed to promote awareness and emphasize the usefulness of language in different ways includes: a concentrated emphasis on oral language in specific oral language classes at the elementary and junior high school level; a diffused emphasis on oral language in the language arts classes; and an expanded oral language offering in senior high school English classes. (LL)

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POINTS OF VIEW

# COMPOSING ALOUD: ORAL COMPOSITION

## "COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR THE AGE OF AQUARIUS"

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Speaker: Rebecca Monaster
Pontiac, Michigan

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add:
31369 Morlock #311
Livonia, Mich. 48152

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# COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR THE AGE OF AQUARIUS

We are told in the musical, HAIR, that this is the Age of Aquarius when peace will guide the planets and love will steer the stars. This prophetic statement, to which many of our students subscribe, pretty well sums up their attitude toward school and society. They reject war, hypocrisy, unnecessary conventions, infringements on freedom, things material, and not being treated with respect. In many diverse and subtle ways they are a new and different group than we have previously encountered in school.

Today's student in the Age of Aquarius is an individual with greatly enlarged horizons, having seen and heard much more of the world than his predecessors of the last generation. His framework for viewing the world and society may be awkward, superficial, inaccurate and complex, but, nonetheless, it is new and different. He is able to identify with great masses of other young people with whom he is eager to conform. He has different prestige figures, is impatient with messages that do not say anything, requires a mutual understanding of objectives, desires an understanding of the context from which others speak and the ability to speak to that context. He wishes to be heard and understood. He is overflowing with experiences, impressions, attitudes that need to be expressed. He races through a series of fads from language to haircuts in demonstrating freedom from rigid cultural, intellectual, aesthetic and behavioral tradition. Since he passively consumes two to four hours of television each day, he desperately needs to talk things out, to get it together, to develop deep concepts and linguistic labels to attach to them. While, in many ways the student in the Age of Aquarius is a powerful, challenging and different person, he still requires a teacher to guide and give order to his experiences.

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The teacher for the Age of Aquarius, therefore, must have a new bag filled with inventiveness and enthusiasm, and must respect the great influence of the world outside the classroom toward inspiring the student's curiosity about intellectual matters. He must be able to capitalize on this and give it organization. He will understand the competition of mass media and be able to give direction, not directions. He must be a teacher who is also a student. He understands that response is a function of the whole personality, that active participation increases learning, that an individual will choose the message that will reward him and that is accessible, that variety is better than a single method of instruction. He has achieved a new level of professional significance, is emancipated from being merely a presenter of information and blue pencil surgeon. He is not just English teacher, but rather, language specialist, communication artist, dynamic curriculum development specialist for the Age of Aquarius.

The demands of this age, research knowledge about the acquisition and control of language, and linguistic discoveries have fostered a burgeoning interest in spoken communication. This subject or skill, however, has heretofore, been a neglected part of the curriculum on the secondary leval and almost non-existent on the elementary level - even though in every listing of language arts speaking and listening are included.

Until Gutenberg, oral language was the primary means of communication. Greek oratory and drama were meant to be delivered orally and were done so until they were rendered silent by print. Christianity, the morality play and news were all spread by the oral language medium. In the Age of Aquarius, roots of this oral tradition are still to be found.

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Poetry is still best communicated orally; social grievances are argued through face-to-face confrontation; Aunt Tilly in a neighboring state usually comprehends better what is said over the telephone as we "lower the cost of loving" than what is written in a letter. For many, a more satisfying religious experience occurs with oral participation. We select our national leaders more on the basis of what they say and how they say it than on the basis of what they write. We are much more speakers and listeners than we are readers and writers. From the cry of Neanderthal Man to the shouts of angry revolutionaries in the street to the seductive whispers from Madison Avanue, oral language is a highly effective medium for communicating and getting a response. Oral language was not only the original kind of human communication but continues to be the most commonly used for giving instructions, for change, for action.

This, however, is also an age of melancholy trends. Kids are bad off! Far too many have needs which are not being met by existing curricular offerings in English and language arts. Research findings go largely unheeded and are often relegated to a spot on the library shelf to gather dust. Too many students move through their school careers without assimilating the skills they urgently need for this new, different and oral world. The fluid, easy, knowledgable command of the language which they have every right to expect, they rarely receive. All children suffer because of this, and as usual, the poor, disadvantaged children suffer most. Environmental deprivation and linguistic deprivation usually go hand-in-hand. Many social and vocational doors are closed to the linguistically-handicapped student who uses so little of the potential of his language.

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The serious deficiencies of language education programs in many schools represent a formidable obstacle to the development of full language power for the student in the Age of Aquarius. At this juncture in language study, it is necessary for every language teacher to develop new attitudes, new understandings and a new commitment to the rooting out of time-wasting activities.

Among the more visible testimonies of the effectiveness of language programs are the scores attained by students on standardized tests. For years we have been using these instruments to measure the effectiveness of language learning and then to stream pupils into programs which have life-long consequences.

A review of State Assessment and Iowa Test results indicate that many of these students do not attain scores reflective of competence in the language skills being measured. The skills of inference which constitute a major part of the reading segment of these tests are skills which receive little attention in most classrooms. When literal comprehension receives the major emphasis, as is true in most reading programs, the important reasoning skills which will be measured on the standardized test are neglected. Neglected because it is assumed that these skills will be learned incidentally. Neglected because most of the time is devoted to the simpler skills of acquiring subject matter. The skills of problem solving, speaking and listening have long been listed among language arts objectives but not always achieved.

When probed deeply, meagerness of verbal expression and depressed intellectual functioning are two facets of the same problem. There is a relationship between language proficiency and the ability to think, and between spoken language competence and reading competence. Today, subject matter, while respected, does not sustain. Students need an arena, a forum for the exchange of ideas and analysis of information.

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The test instruments of and by themselves have little validity until the skills that are being measured are also the skills being taught. This is not to say that the test should dictate the curriculum but rather that the curriculum provide training in the broadest dimension of language so that the competencies being assessed are also those in which the student has had an opportunity to participate and practice.

Altogether too often inference is disregarded in teaching in favor of outcomes which are easier to describe and to measure. Reading, for instance, is really a thought-getting process. The development of mechanical proficiency in the recognition of the printed word is not enough. By the drawing of reasonable inferences from information and by distinguishing among interpretations which are entirely supported by the data, partly supported, irrelevant, probably false, and entirely false, this skill may be reinforced.

Students learn how to use language and that it works, with little or no understanding of why it produces results. In drawing conclusions about a given problem, they usually evaluate the conclusions reached by others who have studied the problem. Unquestionably, the pupil does original thinking on a given issue less frequently than he chooses among the conclusions of others.

To use oral sources effectively, the pupil should understand the "if-then" approach, the conditions under which indirect argument leads to valid conclusions, etc. It is not enough fof the pupil to recognize the forms of argument which are intellectually honest, he should be able also to recognize those which are dishonest, propaganda, etc.

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Some fundamental principles underlying logical thinking instruction follow. Students should evidence-

1. knowledge of the principles underlying the grouping and ordering of words.
   (Try to modify conventional forms of sentences, exercises, written information, etc. so that rote learning is less likely to provide the "correct" answer.)
2. realization of the logical implications of related ideas or propositions.
   (List a number of simple propositions and ask students to state the converse and the inverse for each. Then record the truth or falsity of the proposition. i.e., Proposition: All elephants are large animals. Converse: All large animals are elephants. Inverse: All animals that are not elephants are not large. The converse and inverse are either both true or both false.)
3. recognition and formulation of assumptions underlying an argument.
   (If a conclusion follows logically from certain assumptions, then one either accepts the conclusion or rejects the assumption. In stating arguments, some acceptable proofs should be mixed with unacceptable proofs.)
4. understanding of coherent logical sequence.
   (Present numbered statements of a story or problem and ask students to organize them logically.)

To develop relational thinking skill, students should be able to-

1. recognize relationships
   (Problem situations may be presented and the students asked to discuss factors on which the result depends. - Analyze true or false statements. - Insufficient or unneeded data may be pfesented. Students determine how much is enough.)

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2. interpret relationships expressed by symbols, pictures, graphs.
   (Discuss the emotional vs. intellectual merits of a picture depicting war, advertisements, etc.)
3. associate words with situations
   (Describe a situation in which the word, "obsequious", might be used.)
4. recognize the misuse of a word in context.
   (The product of 471 and 685 is 1,116.)

Within the oral language framework the student has the opportunity to analyze, synthesize, discriminate, compare, generalize about a variety of experiences. No hour should pass during the school day without permitting the student an opportunity to engage in reflective thinking and to participate in an oral language activity. In terms of developing higher intellectual skills, participation is clearly superior to spectatorship.

The concern thus far in this discussion with the needs of students in a new age. To complete the picture it is necessary to consider new curriculum emphases and new devices to make language teaching more productive. There are many prospects in this area and the following is offered as one plan for involving students K-12 in oral language activities which also provide opportunity for instruction in thinking.

Implicit in this plan are the following assumptions:

1. Oral language is vital to thinking and to reading and writing.
2. Mass media have created a new and different society.
3. The nature of the student being taught is different.
4. The role of the teacher is in need of modification.
5. New tools and techniques are needed to improve oral language teaching and to increase learning.

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This program represents a curriculum design based on the communication vehicle of listening and speaking. It recognizes the existent linguistic competence of students when they enter school and the vital role that oral language plays in the life of every individual. This is a program of language learning which promotes an awareness and emphasizes the usefulness of language in different ways under varied circumstances. This three-faceted oral language program includes:

1. the concentrated emphasis on oral language in specific oral language classes on the elementary and junior high school level. The objective is to provide practical learning experiences in speaking and listening so that students can become proficient in the two-way process of communication.
2. the diffused emphasis on oral language in the language arts classes. The relationship between oral language skills and written language skills is a vital one. Oral language development serves as the underlying base for the development of reading achievement.
3. the expanded oral language offering in senior high school English classes. The goal of this emphasis is to create an articulate student with facility in oral expression sufficient for the attainment of social and professional goals.

The new tools of communication which technology has provided are devices which can also make teaching better. Their acceptance in the classroom has been slow, however. This is probably because of inconvenient access, lack of knowledge of utilization and, perhaps a certain condescension. The teaching value of these tools is known, however, and should receive consideration in the modern classroom.

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No Aquarian classroom would be complete without some of the following devices.

Motion pictures and kinescopes
Filmstrips
Radios
Television - commercial, educational and closed circuit
Records and tapes - commercial and "home-made"
Tape-recorder cassettes
Earphones

These devices should free the teacher from the routine delivery of expository material and facilitate the guidance of student learning.

"When the moon is in the seventh house, and Jupiter aligns with Mars", and new language knowledge and methods find their way into the classroom, perhaps we will witness "the mind's true liberation" in an era of "harmony and understanding", a true "Age of Aquarius."